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SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR HANFORD CALLS ON LOCAL OFFICIALS, LEGAL
PROTESTANT CHURCH IN HCMC

REF: A) HCMC 0770 B) HCMC 0710 C) HCMC 0766 D) HCMC 0933 E)
HCMC 1009 F) HCMC 0993

1. (SBU) Summary: In an October 18 meeting with Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom John Hanford, three leaders of the GVN-recognized Southern Evangelical Church of Vietnam (SECV) urged continued, focused USG pressure on the GVN to relax restrictions on unregistered house churches and pastors. At the same time, they cautioned that designation of Vietnam as a Country of Particular Concern (CPC) might prove counterproductive, urging that the GVN be given more time to improve its record. The SECV is the only legal Protestant church organization in southern Vietnam. These leaders said their current priorities were to reopen closed churches, officially ordain greater numbers of practicing pastors (with more freedom to assign them), open a bible school in the Central Highlands, and obtain more space for the HCMC seminary, which just opened in February 2003. Ambassador Hanford met the following day with HCMC Committee for Religious Affairs (CRA) chairman Nguyen Ngoc San, who dismissed recent allegations that the government was targeting unregistered Protestant house churches in the city.

SECV: We Need More Pastors, Property, and Permission to Worship

2. (SBU) The SECV leaders told Ambassador Hanford they had recently given the GVN a list of 214 confiscated properties that they wanted returned. They said they would be happy to take new properties in exchange for old properties that were now beyond their use. Ideally, they hoped to get back the old Protestant seminary in Nha Trang, which was confiscated by the GVN in 1976. The SECV representatives asked Ambassador Hanford to pressure the GVN on this specific point. As an alternative, they mentioned a seven-hectare property (10 times the size of the current space they currently share with the SECV church and offices) that they already own and could build on immediately, without any need for outside funding. The SECV leaders admitted that they had compromised in their haste to make a deal to open the seminary in HCMC, without waiting for the right conditions. They thought the GVN probably assumed the SECV would forget all about the old Nha Trang property once the new seminary opened, but the SECV has not.

3. (SBU) The SECV leaders described a very mixed picture for Protestant worship in Vietnam. While there is generally more freedom to worship in urban areas, the situation in the provinces can often depend much more on local authorities than on central policies. In the Northwest highlands, they noted, some pastors are not allowed to be ordained because they let ethnic minorities worship in their house churches. They also reported stories of forced renunciations (including some at gunpoint), beatings, and soldiers moving into homes, but it was unclear how they obtained this information from the North. The SECV church leaders said it was "rare" to have "terrible things" like that happen in the South. Still, they complained that many of the 755 pastors who had trained "underground" had not been ordained in the South, despite having been approved by the SECV and the Committee for Religious Affairs at the central level. They blamed delays on the provinces, citing the old Vietnamese proverb that, "The authority of the Emperor stops at the village gate." One leader later added, "Maybe the GVN is happy to turn a blind eye to the excesses of the provinces." Another said, "The GVN has the power to make the provinces obey." Without providing specifics, the SECV representatives noted that Protestants were discriminated against in jobs, health care, and education.

4. (SBU) The SECV leaders described a legal Protestant church which is more and more willing to challenge the GVN on issues that matter, but still reluctant to cross an invisible line. They said the GVN had changed its attitude a bit after SECV Acting President Duong Thanh sent a letter to top government and Communist Party officials last year urging them to relax restrictions on Protestant worship in the Central Highlands. The government had started to make some concessions in words, but had not yet followed through. One example the SECV representatives gave was GVN agreement to allow 213 villages in Dak Lak Province to have their own churches, and to allow "branch" churches outside those villages to operate freely pending their own recognition. The SECV leaders are also relying on government promises that the Baptists, Seventh Day Adventists, and WEC (Worldwide Evangelism Crusade) would soon be allowed to affiliate with the SECV and register legal churches. They emphasized the need to prioritize and focus on specific issues in dealing with the GVN.

15. (SBU) All three SECV leaders agreed that designating Vietnam a CPC could potentially anger the GVN, maybe even leading to the kind of religious persecution that existed 10 years ago. They also cautioned that economic sanctions hurt everyone, including Protestants. ("When the economy is strong, everyone's lives are better.") They recommended that the USG clearly define priorities and come back often to measure progress. According to them, setting deadlines is a useful tool, but not if they forced the U.S. to actually designate Vietnam as a CPC. The SECV leaders urged Ambassador Hanford to devise a "pending" CPC list in order "to threaten" the GVN. Ambassador Hanford reminded the SECV Board members that he had already set a six-month deadline back in November 2002 for progress on the release of religious prisoners, the opening of closed churches, and new church registration. Unlike many other violations of religious freedom in Vietnam, these sorts of restrictive actions did not leave much room for flexibility in avoiding CPC designation. The SECV leaders called on the U.S. to continue applying constant, steady pressure on the GVN, but to be careful to "avoid the impression that (you are) working in concert with the SECV." In the end, however, at least two of the three leaders agreed with Ambassador Hanford's proposal that he give the GVN a second chance, but indicate it was likely Vietnam would be designated if there were not significant improvement within a short period of time, e.g., about six months.

CRA: Rules are Rules

16. (SBU) Meeting on Sunday, October 19, with Mr. Nguyen Ngoc San, chairman of the HCMC Committee for Religious Affairs, Ambassador Hanford stressed that he was here to find a way -- for the good of the bilateral relationship -- to avoid having to designate Vietnam as a CPC. Mr. San responded with the usual figures on the growth of religious worship in HCMC, and the official policy line that everyone is free to worship on their own (ref A). He described his role as one of facilitating religious practice, while "helping government officials in the city carry out their duties." Ambassador Hanford assured Mr. San that HCMC has a better reputation for religious freedom than elsewhere in Vietnam, which made more troubling the occasional reports of disruption of religious services, confiscation of religious materials, and imposition of fines for religious activities. Mr. San noted that there had been dramatic increases in the frequency of travel by religious leaders, with some traveling six to seven times per year, as well as in the number of religious publications approved by the CRA.

17. (SBU) Discussing three recent cases affecting Protestant house churches in the city which have garnered attention overseas, CRA chairman San justified government actions which were in accordance with existing administrative regulations, and faulted the congregations instead. In the case of the Thu Thiem church in District 2 (ref B), he noted, the municipal government had allowed the church to stand, even though it was constructed illegally without a permit. For the Full Gospel Assembly Church in District 11 (ref C), he accused church members of having organized a prayer service without permission. The house church in Binh Khanh, Can Gio (ref D) was also illegally constructed, he said. It was torn down as part of a wider move to "restore public order" to residential construction (frequently done without building permits), and was done only after giving adequate notice. Ambassador Hanford reminded the CRA chairman of the importance of allowing even those denominations who do not wish to register to worship freely. Mr. San reiterated GVN policy that religion should be practiced only in appropriately designated houses of worship or at home. But he pointed to support for several Protestant denominations that have yet to be approved for registration, such as the Baptists and Seventh Day Adventists, as proof of the government's flexibility. He also presented the (somewhat novel) argument that it was necessary to regulate the many Protestant denominations in order to avoid traffic congestion and noise pollution. He assured Ambassador Hanford that HCMC would soon see more religious services in foreign languages to accommodate the many expatriates in the city.

18. (SBU) Mr. San told Ambassador Hanford the GVN was eager to facilitate the training needs of all religions in order to ensure quality leaders. Toward that end, he was supportive of efforts to expand the cramped facilities of the new SECV seminary. He also expressed support for more one-month basic training courses, similar to those that had been conducted since 1993, eight years before the GVN officially recognized the SECV. Mr. San indicated there might be some movement toward opening a long awaited seventh Catholic seminary, but thought it preferable to utilize the former seminary property at 6 bis Ton Duc Thang (confiscated by the GVN in 1975), rather than locate new premises in Dong Nai Province. He claimed to be unaware of any government efforts to block the ordination of SECV pastors, saying he had just received a list of ten and approved them all. The CRA's only concern, he claimed, was for none of the candidates to have a criminal record. He also denied knowledge of any restrictions on the assignment of SECV pastors, outside of the usual administrative requirements for changing one's household registration.

19. (SBU) Responding to a question on confiscated properties, the CRA chairman observed that properties formerly operated as

hospitals and schools by various religious groups would continue to be utilized by the GVN for those same functions, but for the welfare of everyone. For other types of buildings, such as churches and offices, GVN policy was to return the property, pay cash compensation, or provide property of equivalent value. He said only four such properties remained in government hands: 6 bis Ton Duc Thang, 171 Ly Thuc Thang, 43 Nguyen Thang, and 320 Le Van Sy. Asked about the former Protestant church across the street from the Consulate at 2 bis Le Duan (ref E), he said he was unaware of a confiscated property at that address, but would check into it. He declined to comment officially on the return of the seminary in Nha Trang, as it lies geographically outside the borders of his jurisdiction, but he seemed certain it would be returned one day soon, now that the GVN had recognized the SECV.

10. (SBU) Mr. San used the same technique to deflect concerns over recent government action (ref F) against leaders of the banned Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam (UBCV). He pointed out that since the UBCV was not itself a legal organization, it was not permissible to organize religious or organizational activities under that name. When the leaders of the outlawed group were found to be in possession of "state secrets" following their illegal organizational meeting in Quy Nhon, the GVN had no choice but to "administratively detain" those involved. Oddly enough, he said that only Thich Tue Sy, Thich Thanh Huyen, and Thich Nguyen Ly had been administratively detained in HCMC, pending further investigation, while UBCV Deputy Thich Quang Do was not. Asked if USG officials could meet with Thich Quang Do, however, he advised that Thich Quang Do was still under investigation and hoped the USG would be patient during this "sensitive time." He promised to "create favorable conditions" for such a visit as soon as practicable.

11. (U) Ambassador Hanford did not have a chance to clear this cable before his departure.

YAMAUCHI